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ABSTRACT

If students are able to relate what they learn in school to experiences they have outside the classroom, they will become better critical thinkers. This paper suggests a model for teachers to use in aiding such "transfer" of knowledge from the classroom to the student's past or future experiences. By maintaining a profile of the student's nonschool activities, teachers can be prepared to ask questions of students that relate a classroom experience to their nonschool environment, thereby increasing the relevance of education. Conclusions are drawn from three University of Nebraska doctoral studies that researched the usefulness of this method in elementary social studies. A 9-item reference list is included, as well as the "Nonschool Activity Student Profile," a brief survey form for students and/or their parents. (DB)

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Teaching for Transfer Through the Use of
Personalized Application Level Questions

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About the Author

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Teaching for Transfer Through the Use of Personalized Application Level Questions

Introduction

Are students able to relate the many experiences they have outside the school environment to the experiences provided in social studies programs? Do students recognize connections between what they learn in social studies and things learned in their home, youth organization, church or synagouge, etc.? We seem to assume that our students will automatically transfer learning experiences from the situation in which it was learned to new situations. Perkins and Salomon (1988) refer to this assumption as the "Bo Peep" theory of transfer. "Let them alone and they'll come home, wagging their tails behind them." "If students acquire information about the Revolutionary War and the Westward emigration, if they learn problem-solving skills in math and some critical thinking skills in social studies, all this will more or less automatically spill over to the many other contexts in and out of school where it might apply," we hope.

Costa (1989) feels that helping students apply school learned knowledge to real life situations and to content areas beyond that in which it was learned is probably the ultimate goal of teaching. "Too often students begin each new task as if it were being approached for the very first time." Perkins and Salomon (1988) have theorized two types of transfer that people use when encountered with new learning situations. Low road transfer is characterized by situations that reflect the automatic triggering of well practiced routines in circumstances where there is considerable perceptual similarity to the original learning context. As an example, the authors use "opening a chemistry book for the first time triggers reading habits acquired else where

or interpreting a bar graph in economics automatically musters bar graph interpretation skills acquired in math." High road transfer "depends on deliberate mindful abstraction of skill or knowledge from one context for application in another." The authors suggest two types of high road transfer, forward reaching and backward reaching. In forward reaching a person learns something and abstracts it in preparation for use elsewhere. In backward high road transfer, key characteristics in a learning situation are identified and the individual reaches backward into his or her experience for matches. The remainder of this paper provides a strategy for how teachers might help learners use backward reaching transfer.

School and Nonschool Learning

As a part of his study of schools, Goodlad (1984) reminds educators of the need to capitalize upon the multi-learning experiences provided by various agencies within a community. If teachers are to help students relate the many worthwhile learning experiences they have in nonschool environments to their social studies program, specific teaching strategies for how to accomplish this task must be developed. As a starting point in the development of these strategies, Sesow (1984) has suggested an interactive model which displays how learners acquire and apply knowledge, skills and values in school and nonschool environments through interactions, participation and memberships. With the model serving as a theoretical framework, Sesow and Sorensen (1987) developed the Nonschool Activity Student Profile and a questioning technique which they titled Personalized Application Level Questions.

The Nonschool Activity Student Profile is an instrument that a teacher can use with their students and/or the parents of their students to determine the types of nonschool activities the students are involved in as well as past

nonschool experiences of the students. When collecting information for the profile, teachers should inform parents or guardians that the information is being collected to help their child find relevance in the curriculum of the school and the school is not prying into the private lives of families. When this is explained parents are usually most anxious to help teachers collect the information. As presented below, the instrument is designed to acquire information about student interactions, participation, and membership.

Nonschool Activity Student Profile

I. Interactions

A. Family Members

1. Father--Occupation _____
2. Mother--Occupation _____
3. Ages of Brothers _____
4. Ages of Sisters _____

B. Adults of the Community

1. Three adults other than family members who the student has the most contact with outside school.
 - a. _____ Occupation _____
 - b. _____ Occupation _____
 - c. _____ Occupation _____

II. Participation

A. Travel

1. The farthest place from home the student has traveled to.
2. What statue in the U.S. has the student visited?
3. What countries outside the U.S. has the student visited?

B. Leisure Activities

1. Three hobbies or activities the student devotes the most time to.

a. _____ b. _____ c. _____

C. Television

1. How many hours per week does the student view television?

2. The three TV programs viewed the most often.

a. _____ b. _____ c. _____

III. Membership

A. Youth Organization

1. What youth organizations does the student belong to?

a. _____ b. _____ c. _____

2. What activities of the above (#1) does the student engage in?

a. _____ b. _____ c. _____

With information about the nonschool activities of their students, teachers can help them use backward reaching transfer by developing personalized application level questions. The application level of Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) suggests that a learner has the ability to use generalizations and to apply principles to specific situations, that is to transfer and apply previous experiences to new situations. Characteristics of personalized application level questions include the following:

1. The question is designed to help an individual student discover a relationship between a previous nonschool experience and the content under consideration.

2. The teacher always starts the question by using an individual student's name. By starting the question with an individual student's name

the questions becomes personalized and after use of this type of questions over a period of time students should be able to develop thinking patterns for backward reaching transfer.

3. The question is designed to focus on one of three basic types of past experiences a student has had which can be related to social studies content under consideration. The student may have had a direct experience with the content under study. Most students have had indirect or vicarious experiences with social studies content through use of technology such as television. The third type of experience that can be incorporated into personalized application level questions is the related experience. This deals with a direct experience the student has had that is similar to the content under consideration. Examples of a direct, indirect, and related experience question are listed below.

1. Direct--During a study of Rocky Mountain States, a teacher might ask, "John, where in Colorado do you and your parents go skiing? Please show us on the map and tell us about some of your recent experiences."

2. Indirect--During a study of Southeastern States, a teacher might ask "Mary, your grandparents live in Florida. What have they told you about Florida?"

3. Related--During a study of Pacific Coast States, a teacher might ask, "Sue, you once lived in Massachusetts. Does the Atlantic Ocean coast there look like the picture of the Pacific Ocean coast on Page 88 of our textbook?"

The above represents limited examples of the three forms of personalized application level questions. These examples are related to typical fifth grade social studies content, a study of the United States by region. Teachers can make use of personalized application level questions when dealing

with abstract content associated with several social studies topics at all grade levels.

In an attempt to determine if prior experiences of a student could be related to abstract social studies textbook content, three doctoral studies were conducted (Sorenson, 1987; Rimmerman, 1987; and Wilson, 1988). Using personalized application level questions with fifth grade students studying social studies content, the three studies supported five conclusions.

1. Nonschool activities of students can be related to social studies content. This conclusion has been obvious to teachers for many years. However, even though teachers did attempt to relate the various learning experiences students were having, a systematic teaching strategy for helping students learn to transfer and relate learning experiences has not been available.

2. When teachers relate nonschool activities of students to social studies content a greater number of higher level questions are used than when teachers do not relate nonschool activities. Use of personalized application questions seem to provide a "natural bridge" for relating acquired knowledge to analysis and synthesis type questions.

3. Students display a more positive attitude toward social studies as a school subject when their nonschool experiences are related to content under study. Too often students have told us that social studies is their least liked subject because it is boring and doesn't related to the "real world." When teachers use personalized application level questions, the "real world" of each child is brought into the classroom.

4. Student participation increases significantly when nonschool activities are related to content under study. If personalized level questions are used teachers will not be able to cover as much content,

however, it appears that the content they do cover will be in greater depth with greater understanding on the part of their students.

5. Students display a greater recall of textbook content and make reference to personal experiences in essay type exams when nonschool experiences are discussed. When teachers use personalized application level questions, without being asked or encouraged to, students make reference to personal nonschool experiences in responding to essay type questions related to the content studied. This conclusion seems to support the notion that if teachers use personalized application level questions their students will gain skill in using backward reaching transfer.

Summary

With a renewed commitment to critical thinking as a part of the elementary, middle, and secondary school curriculum, there is a proliferation of professional literature advocating a variety of definitions of critical thinking and how it should or should not be infused in the instructional program of these schools. The writer of this paper has suggested that helping students transfer nonschool experiences to the school's curriculum will enhance efforts designed to help students become critical thinkers. Through extensive use of personalized application level questions teachers can help students transfer learning experiences that they have in their nonschool environments to learning experiences provided by their teachers. Perhaps this accomplishment will help students discover relevance in their school studies.

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